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Reconfiguring post-Cold War views of international order in the Mediterranean: The Arab uprisings as a conceptual and material turning point?

Frédéric Volpi

- 1 Twenty years before the 2011 Arab uprisings, the process that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union gave a significant impulse to the ideological, institutional and economic reconfiguration of the European region. This impulse came at a time where regional stability was based on a divided Europe, and significant changes were not anticipated in the short to medium term, least of all through a process of democratic revolutions.¹
- 2 The sudden collapse of the communist bloc was no more anticipated than the Arab uprisings were. Policy-makers appeared to have a limited range of options available to them to bridge the gap between a liberal democratic 'West' and an authoritarian communist 'East' (at that time) or an authoritarian and Islamicized 'South' (today).²
- 3 During these two revolutionary periods, long-held views about the resilience of authoritarian regimes and the impossibility of political change in such countries were dramatically transformed (often leading to hazardous policy choices by the international community) and a new rhetoric emerged emphasising a necessary shift to a more democratic order in the European neighbourhood.³
- 4 At the turn of the 1990s a series of political and ideological changes, followed by institutional and economic transformations, facilitated a relatively rapid shift in Europe from divided regional stability to unified regional stability. The query in this paper is therefore how contemporary transformations in the Arab world could contribute to similar dynamics in the Mediterranean region today.
- 5 To construct an argument, grounded on path-dependency, I consider here three aspects of regionalization by institutionalized social and political actors: first, the

dominant narratives in the discursive construction of the Mediterranean; second, the main mechanisms of institutionalization of a regional system; and third, the main policies of socio-economic governance in the region. In so doing, I acknowledge that such an approach leaves out many other factors that could be invoked to evaluate the substance and evolution of Mediterranean ideas and practices.

Historicizing the questions

- 6 In the Mediterranean region, there have been repeated convergences and divergences of an ideational and material nature between states and communities. These phenomena illustrate the centrifugal and centripetal trends in the region that underpin the construction of a more unified regional entity and their fragmentation into more autonomous components.
- 7 In the twentieth century, during the colonial period, the international arena was characterized by expansionism and power projection by European powers. Their *realpolitik* approach to the eastern and southern Mediterranean subordinated local interests –politically, culturally and economically– to those of the dominant imperial powers. There was therefore a strong push toward a form of regional integration, but it was a forced homogenization that did not have the endorsement of many of the communities on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.⁴
- 8 The early post-colonial period, in contrast, exhibited new trends toward fragmentation as former colonies focused their attention on domestic development and regime stabilization. Two noticeable counter-trends marked the early post-colonial period. On the northern shores of the Mediterranean, the nucleus of the European Union put in place the ideational, institutional and economic basis of European integration (which, incidentally, at the time of the 1957 Rome treaty included Algeria as a French department).
- 9 On the southern shores, another type of ideological integration gained momentum on the basis of pan-Arabism. Soon, however, political tensions among the leaders of authoritarian post-colonial regimes ensured that this template was not followed by viable institutional and economic rapprochements. This was a period of ideological politics, intensified by Cold War rivalries between the USA and the USSR, that ensured continuing atomisation of the ‘South’ and defiance vis-à-vis the ‘West’.⁵
- 10 In this perspective, in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, three turning points can be readily identified in relation to the regional dynamics of integration/disintegration in the Mediterranean: the end of the Cold war; September 11, 2001; and the Arab uprisings.

Turning points in the modern Mediterranean region

The 1990s

- 11 The end of the Cold War initiated a new ideological, institutional and socio-economic process of rapprochement within Europe. Yet it is questionable how significant this change was in the 1990s for increasing regional interaction and collaboration in the Mediterranean. In particular, it is useful to ask to what extent the end of the Cold War

merely discursively portrayed a greater regional integration instead of actually introducing new dynamics into the region. And even at the ideational level, it is worth noting that while this transformation may be marked by a rather idealistic approach to development and democratization in the 'North', it is by contrast often seen from a more pragmatic if not disabused angle in the 'South'.⁶

- 12 In the Mediterranean context, many of these trends did not emerge suddenly at the end of the Cold War after a wave of regime change but slowly gained momentum throughout the 1980s to become dominant in the post-Cold War context. In this perspective it could be argued that the Barcelona process initiated in 1994 provided an institutional framework for many pre-existing trends rather than actually spurring many new integrative processes.⁷
- 13 In particular, from a socio-economic perspective, the neoliberal policies of the so-called Washington consensus (a term coined in 1989) were slowly endorsed and implemented throughout the non-socialist parts of the Mediterranean during the 1980s, most notably under the aegis of the IMF. The IMF process of structural adjustment may have had a sound macro-structural economic logic, but it generated high social costs on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, and thus appeared to sharpen the North-South divide.⁸ In addition, in many polities the EU-sponsored *Programme de Mise à Niveau* (PMN) indirectly strengthened the leverage of authoritarian regimes over the private sector and favoured crony-capitalism.⁹
- 14 From an institutional angle, the EU model and its *acquis communautaire* slowly established itself as the norm, first in Southern Europe (including, to a degree, in Turkey, which applied to be a candidate country in 1987) and then in Eastern Europe. Hence, the Barcelona process proposed only a limited version of this model of governance without the possibility of full membership being offered to the countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.¹⁰
- 15 Finally, at the ideological level, while the 1990s saw the rise of the discourse of liberal democracy in the region, it clearly was only rhetorically endorsed and instrumentalized by ruling elites in the south. The ideational dimension of the Mediterranean region constructed in the Barcelona declaration was known to be artificial but was meant to be inspirational.¹¹ By the end of the decade, the lip service paid by authoritarian regimes in the 'South' to this democratic discourse may well have been the price that vice paid to virtue, but the normative democratic ideal was increasingly weakened by the pretence of democratic regimes in the 'North' to believe the reformist rhetoric of their authoritarian partners.¹²

The 2000s

- 16 At the beginning of the 2000s, al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attack on the United States initiated a new turn in international relations and, by implication, in the regional dynamics of the Mediterranean. Superficially, the initiation of the 'War on Terror' provided another framework for regional integration through common security initiatives and policies. Substantially, however, the dominance of the 'Islamist threat' security frame and the implications of securitization had a negative impact on the ideational and material processes of regionalization imagined at the time of the Barcelona declaration.¹³

- 17 Ideationally, the emphasis on international security as an outcome of regime stability in the region further undermined an already weakened notion of democratic normative order for the region. It indirectly validated the continuing division between democratic and non-democratic regimes –roughly between the north and the south of the Mediterranean region– by prioritizing a convergence of security policies over a convergence of models of governance.¹⁴ In this context, it is not that surprising that the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean devised by French president Nicolas Sarkozy as a new model for cooperation across the Mediterranean in the second half of the 2000s should have as its *modus vivendi* co-ownership with ruling southern autocrats.¹⁵
- 18 The securitization paradigm also affected the dynamics of socio-economic rapprochement, notably by hindering the circulation of goods and persons on the basis of security risks. Increased attempts by European governments to strictly control migratory fluxes, often through a re-prioritization of bilateral relations, validated migration policies that further entrenched those authoritarian regimes that presented themselves as the bulwark against migration (viz. Libya in relation to Italy).¹⁶
- 19 Institutionally, the new international and regional security paradigm strengthened the capabilities of authoritarian institutions (including those of the police and armed forces through increased sales of weaponry) in order to improve the security and surveillance capabilities of those regimes on the southern shores of the Mediterranean which were allies in the ‘War on Terror’ –including unlikely candidates such as Gaddafi’s Libya.¹⁷ The desire to bolster the capabilities and stability of such authoritarian regimes contributed to a partial blindness to their internal weaknesses and to the possibilities of change in the region.¹⁸

The 2010s

- 20 The unannounced Tunisian democratic revolution that kick-started the Arab uprisings set in motion a wave of regime change on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. It revealed the causal importance of a form of popular-based leaderless/leaderful and ideology-less revolutionary mobilization that had remained underestimated by analysts and policy-makers up to that point.¹⁹
- 21 Ideationally, the political revolutions initiated by the Arab uprisings in 2011 enabled a reversion to the idealized democratizing discourse of the end of the Cold War and of the Barcelona declaration, as well as encouraging some versions of Arabism and positive views of an Arab-Islamic public. There was also an explicit ‘*mea culpa*’ from many EU and European policy-makers who assured their audiences that they had learned from their mistakes in collaborating with authoritarian regimes.
- 22 In 2011, Štefan Füle, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood, stated:
- Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region. Too many of us fell prey to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region. This was not even *Realpolitik*. It was, at best, short-termism –and the kind of short-termism that makes the long term ever more difficult to build.²⁰
- 23 However, what became clear over the following months, and up to the present day, was that this ideological sea-change in perceptions of the region was quite transient and

was tied to the political vagaries of the post-revolutionary situation (viz. the 2013 military coup in Egypt).²¹

- 24 Politically and institutionally, there are important distinctions to be made between the immediate response of international and regional state actors and organisations, and their medium-term political and institutional orientations (which become visible only now).
- 25 First, the immediate political response to the 2011 uprisings did not provide the kind of fresh policy start that had been witnessed toward Eastern Europe in 1989-91. Certainly there was a new explicit support for and rapprochement with the new revolutionary elites of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (until 2013), but at the same time there was continuing political and institutional support for the status-quo states (Morocco, Algeria, Jordan). In addition, there was also ambiguity toward situations in Syria and, later, vis-à-vis Egypt's new military-backed regime. Overall, the political orientation of the EU seemed to indicate a continuing deprioritization of the democratic agenda in the articulation of its policies toward the Mediterranean.²²
- 26 Second, after the immediate period of revolutionary change there was clearly a lack of a rearticulation of institutional models of association at the regional level, as illustrated by the continuation of EU negotiations for an advance partnership status with Tunisia (similar to that of Morocco) on the basis of prenegotiations with the Ben Ali regime. Despite some financial rewards –such as those of the Spring programme– for the new democratic regimes, the EU did not differently institutionalize its relations with democratic and non-democratic regimes on the southern shores of the Mediterranean (in the way it did, for example, in Eastern Europe with accession candidates after 1989).²³
- 27 From an economic perspective, too, while socio-economic tensions were clearly one of the main elements underpinning the uprisings in the Arab world and the protest movements in Southern Europe at around the same time (Greece, Spain, Portugal) there was no a change of economic framework for regional integration. The neo-liberal orthodoxy that shaped the economic response of the EU to the financial crisis that most affected its southern European members similarly framed the socio-economic response of the EU toward the Arab Spring countries.²⁴ This was all the more damaging given that the Arab uprisings often were aimed precisely at the harsh consequences of neoliberal policies and market capitalism on the poorer strata of society.²⁵
- 28 In substance, the economic deal proposed post-2011 to newly democratic regimes of the region is not only the same as the one proposed under Ben Ali, Gaddafi and Mubarak, but it is also the same as the one proposed to countries that did not go through a process of democratization during the Arab uprisings (Morocco, Algeria, Jordan). In effect, the additional funds proposed to post-revolutionary regimes are directed only at the top institutions, and are not very significant considering the upheaval generated by revolutionary change. In addition, now like before, there is still no conditionality that would link economic and political liberalization (as the relations with Egypt after the coup illustrate).²⁶
- 29 The medium-term response of European governments (or rather the lack of it) also illustrates policy continuity vis-à-vis the Mediterranean region before and after the Arab uprisings. Ideationally, political approaches still emphasize a reform process that would create a unified liberal democratic model in the region. Practically, however, we

still have a neorealist interpretation of the Barcelona vision that subordinates institutional and economic initiatives to traditionally defined national interest for all the relevant states involved.²⁷

- 30 Equally, for southern actors, the initial Arabist and Islamist solidarity in the region at the time of the uprisings did not result in tangible institutional or economic rapprochements. In addition, attempts by other regional players, such as the Gulf States, to take advantage of regime change in North Africa destabilised even further the post-uprising situations in these countries. Hence, the involvement of international actors other than the EU in the Mediterranean did not facilitate regional integration – quite the opposite.²⁸
- 31 In the post-revolutionary context, new tensions emerged to replace old ones, and there was a noticeable return of ideological politics, particularly in the shape of Islamist versus secularist approaches to governance. This situation reduced even further the already weakened institutional capacity of states to collaborate regionally on difficult issues (viz. Egyptian coup, Syrian conflict, Israel-Palestine tensions). Overall, the post-Arab uprising period seems to have reaffirmed the dynamics of fragmentation seen during the preceding decade of the ‘War on Terror’.²⁹

NOTES

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ABSTRACTS

This paper addresses the significance of the 2011 Arab uprisings for the construction of a more cohesive Mediterranean region. It considers the evolution of the political dynamics of integration and non-integration in the Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War. It examines how far the processes initiated by the Arab uprisings provide a new impulse for regional integration and how far the new post-revolutionary dilemmas prolong and/or strengthen the kind of regional fragmentation witnessed during the preceding decade of the "war on terror".

Cet article étudie la signification des insurrections arabes du printemps 2011 sur la construction d'une région Méditerranée plus intégrée. Il considère l'évolution des dynamiques politiques d'intégration et de non-intégration en Méditerranée depuis la fin de la guerre froide. Il étudie jusqu'où les processus issus des insurrections arabes produisent une nouvelle impulsion en direction de l'intégration régionale et jusqu'où les difficultés post-révolutionnaires prolongent et/ou renforcent la fragmentation régionale observée au cours de la décennie qui a précédé la « guerre contre la Terreur ».

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Mots-clés: intégration régionale, dynamiques politiques, démocratisation, Union européenne, insurrections arabes, division Nord-Sud

Keywords: regional integration, political dynamics, democratization, European Union, Arab uprisings, North-South divide

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